



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# AN ESTIMATE OF MAETERLINCK

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

IN the late afternoon of a typical winter day in Paris, December 14th, 1903, and in response to a cordial invitation giving the time and the place, I walked through the cold drizzle up on the heights not so far from the Trocadéro, entered the long crooked Rue Raynouard, came to an opaque portal in an opaque wall, made out in the darkness the number 67, rang a bell, and waited the result of the tintinnabulation—which went echoing off in the remote interior—with an accelerated heart. I am not ashamed to confess that I have always been a hero-worshipper; only my heroes are not pioneers, nor politicians, nor captains of industry: they are creative artists. I admire individual specimens of all the classes just mentioned, only I admire them without any excitement; but I never can see a poet, novelist, dramatist, painter, musician, without reverence. I had time to think about all this and various other matters before the solid gate fell back. I followed a maid-servant through long passages and reverberating corridors—just as if we were characters in one of the plays—until after an incredibly long and winding pilgrimage, the maid stopped in front of a door and knocked. A clear voice called “*Entrez!*” and I did.

A cheerful contrast it was to all I had seen outside of it. It was a rather small square room; a bright fire was blazing merrily in the open grate; the walls were lined with books; a table was in the middle of the room, a comfortable chair placed at it, while directly behind the chair, so that the writer could reach these particular books without getting up, was a set of the Mermaid Series of the Elizabethan Dramatists, besides many other volumes in the English language. The chair at the desk faced the door, and as I entered, I saw the man in the chair busily writing in the old-fashioned way, with pen and ink. He looked up with a hospitable expression, immediately rose, shook hands warmly, and

offered me a cigarette. I lit it, and was so confused that I put the wrong end in my mouth. This appeared to amuse M. Maeterlinck; in fact, he roared with laughter. I laughed to keep him company, and at once we seemed to be intimate.

For an hour we talked freely, "*Une heure amicale*," he was kind enough to call it afterwards. He spoke of his immense admiration for English literature, for English poets, English dramatists, and, among American authors, for Emerson. He confirmed all that he had written to me about his love for Browning. I reminded him of his early translation of the Elizabethan Ford's tragedy, *'Tis Pity*, and he smiled, saying it was a work of his youth. I told him of my difficulties in finding a copy in Paris, and of my pleasure in finally adding it to my collection. We spoke a good deal about his play *Monna Vanna*, and when I said I should witness it next month in Munich, he looked distressed, saying that the Munich performance was bad—later, I thought it was good. It certainly gives one a notion of the standards that prevail at Paris when I say that of all the months I have spent in Paris in the twentieth century, never at any time during my visits to that city has there been a single one of Maeterlinck's plays on the stage. I can judge of the acting qualities of his dramas only through English and German.

As I rose to go, he gave me an autograph copy of his translation of the work of a Flemish mystic.

When Maeterlinck visited America for the first time in 1919, I found him the same man—frank, hearty, modest and sincere. The enormous successes of his plays written since 1903 had not changed his personal manner.

Maeterlinck is one of the great dramatists of modern times, and is perhaps, if we consider both the excellence of his work and its universal influence, the foremost living writer in the world. Although practically all of his work is in prose, he is commonly spoken of as a poet—an unconscious recognition of the spirit and quality of his writings—and he used to be called "the Belgian Shakespeare." He has modestly insisted that the late Emile Verhaeren, the Belgian poet and dramatist, is a more important figure in literature than himself; but he can get no one to agree with him. During the war there was talk of electing Maeter-

linck to the French Academy, despite his foreign birth and citizenship; in a letter to *Le Journal*, he suggested that they choose instead "my old friend Emile Verhaeren, first, because he is my elder; second, because he is a very great poet, while I am only an industrious and conscientious prose writer. Anyone with patience could write what I have written; nobody could do what he has done. Only a poet is qualified to represent worthily a nation's greatness and heroism."

Patience is an admirable quality; but, uncommon as it is, it is more common than genius. Nor is it a particular qualification for producing literature. Browning and Byron were unlike in many ways, but neither was conspicuous for possessing patience.

Good news was brought to Ghent on August 29th, 1862, for on that day and in that place Maurice Maeterlinck was born. He came of a very old Flemish family, and had the mediæval mystics in his blood. He took the regular course at the Jesuit College of Sainte-Barbe, in Ghent. These early religious impressions were lasting, for though it cannot be said that Maeterlinck is either an orthodox Catholic or Protestant, he is a life-long student of religion, and not from an aloof standpoint. He is a religious man, and ethical ideas have formed the foundation of much of his work. After graduating in 1885, he took up the study of law at the University of Ghent. But he cared much for literature and little for law.

M. Tourquet-Milnes informs us that the first thing written by Maeterlinck that got into print was *The Massacre of the Innocents*. The scene is in Nazareth and we are told that it is painfully detailed and realistic. It is interesting to note that in common with all great writers, his main inspiration is the Bible. Its pages were to have a powerful influence on his mature prose style, and he was later to write a play on Mary Magdalene.

After this prose sketch, came what is generally called Maeterlinck's first publication (really his second), a volume of poems named *Hot-Houses* (*Serres Chaudes*.) This thin book is full of vaguely melancholy verse; quite different in appearance are these forced flowers from those of *The Double Garden*.

*Serres Chaudes* appeared in 1889; and three years before, Mae-

terlinck had realized a dream of his boyhood—he saw Paris for the first time. I am quite sure that no American and no Frenchman can realize or even adequately imagine the sensations of an ambitious Belgian when he first comes to Paris. Maeterlinck was twenty-four; so far as polite intercourse and writing had been concerned, French was his mother-tongue; yet he had never seen Paris nor heard Parisians talking together. His attitude toward the centre of French art and literature must have been entirely different from that of a southern Frenchman like Alphonse Daudet, or from an Englishman who had learned the language in his youth.

English literature is diffused all over the world; it can never be centralized again as it was at London in the days of Samuel Johnson. But French literature is still centralized at Paris; and as young Maeterlinck saw the world-famous poets and novelists walking the streets, and lingered in the Bohemian cafés listening to manuscript verse from youthful enthusiasts, we can only imagine his excitement and the spur to his literary ambition. “Very often,” he once said to the journalist, Jules Huret, “I saw Villiers de l’Isle Adam. It was at the *Brasserie Pousset* in Montmartre. There were others too: Mendès came in occasionally.”

After some months in the French capital, he returned to Belgium and lived in solitude and calm—that expectant calm that hovers over the landscape of the Low Countries—that silence which was to be characteristic of his early dramas. This period of prolonged and uninterrupted meditation, study, reflection, and composition was immensely important to his future development.

His reputation bloomed in the same year that saw the publication of *Serres Chaudes*, though not by that work; for in 1889—the year of the first play by Hauptmann and the first by Sudermann—Maeterlinck produced *La Princesse Maleine*, a tragedy in five acts. Octave Mirbeau, who was later to become a famous dramatist, and who was then a journalist, greeted the unknown Belgian with the following rhapsody, printed in *Figaro*, August 24th, 1890:

I know nothing whatever of M. Maurice Maeterlinck. I don’t know where he comes from or anything about his present condition. I don’t know whether he is old or young, rich or poor. I only know that no man is more unknown than he; and I know also that he has produced a masterpiece, not indeed a

masterpiece so labeled in advance, such as our young poets publish every day, sung on every note in their yelping lyre, or rather on the contemporary yelping flute; but an admirable and pure eternal masterpiece, a masterpiece which is enough to immortalise a name and to make this name blessed by all who hunger for the lofty and the beautiful; a masterpiece, such as all honest and struggling artists, sometimes, in their moments of enthusiasm, have dreamed of writing and such as no one of them has written until now. In short, M. Maeterlinck has given us a work more richly charged with genius than any of our time, and also the most extraordinary and the most simple, comparable—shall I dare to say?—superior in beauty, to what is most beautiful in Shakespeare. This work is called *La Princesse Maleine*. Are there twenty persons living who have heard of it? I think not.

That was the beginning of the echoing cry, “The Belgian Shakespeare.” Now it is easy enough to laugh at this rhapsody, as many have done; but Mirbeau was not so far from the truth. Certainly the world has not placed Maeterlinck above Shakespeare; certainly *La Princesse Maleine* in itself does not and did not deserve such extravagant praise. But the most important thing to remember is that Octave Mirbeau recognised the genius in this play at a time when the author was unknown; and Mirbeau was right in his wild enthusiasm, for Maeterlinck, although no one but Mirbeau suspected it, was to be accepted as one of the great writers of the world.

Yet it was years later that when a professor in an Eastern college in America asked his class if they knew who Maeterlinck was, one youth confidently volunteered this information: “He is the king of Abyssinia.”

It is inevitable that Maeterlinck should have been labeled; a label is like a proverb or a catch-phrase: it saves expense of thought. So Maeterlinck’s plays were called “symbolistic,” “static,” and so on. Like all artists, he felt the same objection to classification that the subjects of art themselves feel. In a letter to Mr. Barrett Clark, cited in the latter’s valuable book, *The Continental Drama of Today*, Maeterlinck wrote:

You must not attach too great importance to the expression “Static”; it was an invention, a theory of my youth, worth what most literary theories are worth,—that is, almost nothing. Whether a play be *static*, or *dynamic*, *symbolistic* or *realistic*, is of little consequence. What matters is that it be well written, well thought out, human, and, if possible, superhuman, in the deepest significance of the term.

That it should be superhuman is not only a favorite idea of the Belgian author, it was realised in all his best plays except *Monna Vanna*. Every work of talent has three dimensions: length, breadth, depth, and if it be a work of genius (which includes talent) then it invariably has the fourth dimension, as shown by the plays of Ibsen. For example, *Pélléas et Mélisande*, reduced to its lowest terms, is the familiar tragedy (Paolo and Francesca) of a young and beautiful woman married to an old, ugly, uninteresting husband, and allowed frequent conversation with the husband's young, handsome, and brilliant brother. The same result invariably happens, although not always the same consequences. You have love, conscience, loyalty, treachery, jealousy, murder, remorse—surely the ingredients of tragedy. But over all this, Maeterlinck throws a veil through which we see these lovers struggling helplessly like children in the night; and for the time all human life seems surrounded by impenetrable forests in which the children of men are lost, because we have no map and no guide. The little group of sufferers, who suffer horribly, represent humanity. There are times when we all feel the "encircling gloom". Even sure-footed Newman was content to take only one step.

The love of "silence" in Maeterlinck's plays, the suggestion of meaning by pauses and immobility, so characteristic of *Les Aveugles*, *L'Intruse*, and *Intérieur*, arises, I think, from that overwhelming desire in every artist for some better means of communication than spoken words. It is only the unthinking and the inartistic and the unimaginative who find human speech a satisfactory method of communicating ideas and intentions; perhaps it is adequate to the ideas and intentions that such people employ—as some poems are clear because they are shallow. Browning, who had a wide vocabulary and unusual power of expression, frequently cried out against the inadequacy of words as a vehicle of thought. He believed that in the next world we should have some better method.

The intimacy of silence is naturally the most difficult of all things to represent on the stage. Yet in real life silence is often the best means of communication between those whose affection is sincere and deep. Love, and even friendship, will annihilate

formality; it is only between new or rarely-meeting acquaintances that a constant flow of conversation must be maintained. Carlyle and Tennyson both agreed that the best evening they ever spent together was when they sat voiceless for hours, opening their mouths only to exhale tobacco-smoke; they knew each other so perfectly that they were in absolute harmony; somehow their thoughts traveled from one to the other through the smoky fragrance more swiftly and more clearly than through the medium of words. Mr. Howells said that he and Mark Twain once entered the smoking compartment of a train at Hartford, sat directly facing each other for three hours, and exchanged not a word until they entered the station at New York. Mr. Howells lacked the power of expression through nicotine; but both friends felt no embarrassment, and enjoyed the journey together.

This would be static drama if represented on the stage—and something akin to this is actually accomplished in the plays of Maeterlinck. It is communication through silence—not necessarily between human beings—but between a human being and surrounding imponderable forces.

The “obscurity” of Maeterlinck is unlike the obscurity of those authors whose language is clumsy or involved; his obscurity arises from the fact that he is an individual constantly oppressed by the environment of vast mysteries; and in the simple language of his plays he is forever trying to give to the reader or the spectator that double sense of infinite distance and close imprisonment.

One drama that is usually passed over in discussions of his work, I believe to be one of his most beautiful, most important, and therefore most lasting—*Sœur Béatrice*. This was written in 1901, and came just before that definite change in his manner which was marked the next year by *Monna Vanna*. In *Sœur Béatrice* we have a masterpiece both of literature and of the stage. Yet he himself dismisses it as a trifle.

Not only is this one of the best of Maeterlinck’s plays for representation, provided always the setting and actors are adequate, but it comes as near as any other of his dramas to expressing his philosophy—which may be summed up in the one word Love. In *Sœur Béatrice*, *Monna Vanna*, *Joyzelle*, *Mary Magdalene*, *L’Oiseau Bleu*, *The Betrothal*, Love is the fulfillment of the law—



the final philosophy and religion. It is in this aspect of his work that Maeterlinck comes closest to Browning; for the English poet would have delighted in the story of the Virgin and in the sacrifice made by Monna Vanna.

As everyone has noticed, a definite turning point in Maeterlinck's career occurred in 1902. This was signified by the production of *Monna Vanna* in that year. Up to this time he had been a "literary" dramatist, enjoying a reputation as a man of letters and a philosopher, but not regarded as a practical playwright. But *Monna Vanna* was and is a brilliant stage play, full of contrasts, full of conflict, full of passion, and ending with a marvellous opportunity for the actress. No wonder that its success has always been associated with some woman; for the man who takes the part of Prinzivalle has the thankless and difficult task of remaining on the stage during the third act without saying a word. Like a cinema actor whose happiness and life are at stake, he must continually "register" emotion.

Two problems interested Maeterlinck in this play: Can a woman be physically dishonored and yet spiritually pure? Should a woman sacrifice her "honor" for her country or for the welfare of others, as boldly as she would sacrifice her life? To both of these questions the dramatist gives an unqualified affirmative; in fact, he re-emphasizes the first in *Joyzelle*.

The meaning of *Monna Vanna* ought to be transparently clear, for in this play the author emerged from the veil of symbolism. Yet many have misunderstood it. In two letters to enquirers, Maeterlinck said that Monna Vanna is a true heroine, and old Marco the inspiring genius—he represents the final wisdom of life, having lived long and learned much. Monna Vanna sympathised keenly with her husband's agony in the first act, and still loved him; she would have continued to love him, even after the affecting interview with Prinzivalle; but his stupidity and total lack of confidence in her and in her word finally open her eyes to his meanness. She strives no longer against her growing love for Prinzivalle, and will fly with him to some remote place, where, if destiny permits, she will begin a new and happier life. In this explanation, Maeterlinck used almost the exact words of Ibsen: "She recognises that her marriage has been a lie".

The first performance of Maeterlinck's *Mary Magdalene* took place in the English language and on the New York stage; it happened at the New Theatre, December 5th, 1910. There were three difficulties: the translation was not very good, the leading actress was miscast, and everyone was reminded of Paul Heyse's play on the same theme, which had been powerfully interpreted in English by Mrs. Fiske. Two points were borrowed from Heyse; and when Maeterlinck wrote to the old German dramatist asking permission to use them, he was refused not only unequivocally but harshly. Then he determined to use them anyway, saying in his preface that one was taken from the New Testament and the other was common stage property—it was, in fact, the ethical problem that we have already seen in *Monna Vanna* and in *Joyzelle*. It seemed at one time to obsess Maeterlinck.

Maeterlinck bought an old Norman Abbey near Rouen, where a performance of *Macbeth* attracted wide attention. It was in this romantic and inspiring Abbey of Saint Wandrille—which gave him even more inspiration than he could have hoped for—that he wrote *L'Oiseau Bleu* (which, by the way, should be called in English *The Blue Bird*—never *The Bluebird*). This carried his fame to the remotest parts of the earth, and, unsupported, it is sufficient to carry his fame to remote generations. It is the crown of his life's work, summing up all his best qualities as poet, dramatist, playwright. His early dramas are a greater success in the library than on the stage; *Monna Vanna* is a greater success on the stage than in the library; *L'Oiseau Bleu* is equally great in both places—it is a masterpiece in literature and it is all-conquering in the theatre. It is an original and beautiful play—a distinct contribution to our present glorious age of drama.

When it was ready for the stage, the author sent it to Mr. Stanislavski, the Director of the Artistic Theatre at Moscow. It was played in the Russian language in the year 1908, and from that first night—the world's most exciting *première* since *Cyrano de Bergerac*—it traveled far and fast. It has been given at the Moscow theatre alone over three hundred times; when put on at London, December 8th, 1909, it ran for over three hundred performances, the excitement being so intense that the management was often forced to give twelve presentations every week; when

it started the second season of the New Theatre in New York, October 1st, 1910, it was the talk of the town.

Like *Peter Pan*, it charmed both young and old. The delight of the children was audible at every performance; but the "deeper joys" of men and women were, if less vocal, even more in evidence. For just as in all his work, Maeterlinck's language is simple and his ideas complex, so *L'Oiseau Bleu* appeals to human beings at every stage in their journey.

So far as *L'Oiseau Bleu* has any philosophy, it is of course pessimism; even in that amazingly beautiful scene—the best in the New York version—the Land of Memory, the pathos arises from the fact that the dead never live at all except when the living think of them; which makes the graveyard, with the exclamation *There are no Dead*, seem as inconsistent as the scene showing that all individuals have a definite existence long before they are born. Furthermore, at the end of the play the Blue Bird disappears; nor did the children need to learn about it, because, at the opening, their delight in the view of their rich neighbors' happiness is quite unshadowed by envy,—a charming episode. But why look for logic in a work of art? Why cloud a thing of beauty by pointing out inconsistencies?

*The Betrothal* was an agreeable surprise. Naturally and inevitably, it lacked the novelty of *The Blue Bird*, but its inspiration was equally fresh and strong. The interest was steadily maintained, the successive scenes were both beautiful and captivating, and there was the same combination of fresh simplicity and far-reaching imagination. It was even more provocative to thought than *The Blue Bird*, presenting its ideas in a more aggressive and challenging way. The only thing that militates against the success of *The Betrothal* is the enormous cost of the production; even with the theatre packed night after night, it did not meet expenses.

Although here, as in *The Blue Bird*, happiness, if it exists anywhere, is to be found right at home—for the young man, after experimenting with many distant strangers, finally marries his little neighbor—the old bugbear Destiny has nothing to do with it. In the early scenes, Destiny is a colossal figure; he constantly becomes smaller, and finally he is no bigger than a doll, and is

handled contemptuously by human beings. The Ancestors hold the trumps, and determine the young man's choice of his mate. They are a heterogeneous collection. After seeing this play, one might logically believe that *The Blue Blood* is as difficult to find as *The Blue Bird*.

Maeterlinck's war play, *A Burgomaster of Belgium*, was produced in New York in the spring of 1919, and, while it was much better than most war plays, added little to Maeterlinck's reputation. The truly remarkable feature of it is Maeterlinck's aloofness. The play was written during the darkest hours, by a man passionately devoted to his country, and that country was Belgium; yet the presentation of characters and events was so honestly dramatic that many idiots said the piece was "pro-German"!

Maeterlinck has always been a greater writer than philosopher; a greater master of style than of thought. I have ever regarded him as a great teacher, as so many seem to do. It is just as impossible to formulate a universal philosophy as it is to demonstrate the absolute truth of religion. Maeterlinck loves metaphysical speculation; he has studied and reflected much; he knows ancient writers, Flemish mystics, Carlyle and Emerson by heart. He observes life with the minuteness of the scientist and with the imagination of the poet—men and women, animals and flowers. He has not only written about mediæval and modern heroes and heroines, he has written about dogs and bees. Even so, he is more dreamer than interpreter.

But although Maeterlinck is neither a great teacher nor a great philosopher, he is a great writer, a great dramatist, a great artist. The so-called "truths" of philosophy pass away, for they are often mere fashions of thought; every professional philosopher has them in his shop-window; sometimes they are garments covering lifeless blocks; you ask for an idea and you get a phrase; to-morrow the world will all be running after new phrases, which will then be as fashionable as the catchwords of today. But beauty endures forever.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS.